



Smart Cities vs. Smart Citizens: The Gap Between Policy Promises and Lived Realities in Urban India

Komal Vithlani¹, Dr. Prateek Kanchan²

¹Research Scholar, ²Senior Professor and Director and Research Guide

B.K School of Professional and Management Studies, Gujarat University, Ahmedabad-380009

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The Smart Cities Mission (SCM), launched by the Government of India in 2015, aims to improve urban governance and citizens' quality of life through technology-driven development. This study examines the gap between the policy promises of the Smart Cities Mission and the documented lived realities of citizens across four Indian cities namely Delhi, Bengaluru, Kolkata, and Ahmedabad. Guided by an interpretivist paradigm, the research adopts a qualitative multiple-case study design using documentary evidence from government policy documents, Smart City Proposals, Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) reports, peer-reviewed journal articles, and international institutional publications. Data were analysed using Interpretive Policy Analysis, documentary analysis, and thematic analysis. The study develops and applies the Citizen-Centred Governance Framework (CCGF) to evaluate governance responsiveness, citizen participation, spatial justice, and policy implementation. The findings reveal that although the Smart Cities Mission has strengthened digital infrastructure and urban modernization, these developments have not consistently resulted in inclusive and citizen-centred outcomes. Limited public participation, uneven service delivery, weak institutional coordination, and spatial inequalities continue to influence implementation across the selected cities. The study concludes that successful smart city development depends not only on technology but also on responsive governance, democratic accountability, and meaningful citizen participation. The proposed CCGF offers a practical framework for evaluating and strengthening citizen-centred urban governance in India.

Keywords: Smart Cities Mission, Citizen-Centred Governance, Urban Governance, Policy–Reality Gap, Interpretive Policy Analysis, India.

1. Introduction and Contextual Background

1.1 The Technocratic Illusion

Since the launch of the National Smart Cities Mission in 2015, the way Indian cities are planned has undergone a radical change. For decades, urban planning focused on public welfare and poverty alleviation. Even if it was far from perfect, the main goal was to expand basic services for everyone. Today, that has been replaced by a corporate model that prioritizes digital efficiency above all else.

According to official guidelines from the **Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs**, a smart city is meant to improve institutional, physical, social, and economic infrastructure. The state claims



that by deploying smart solutions such as data-driven traffic tracking, automated lighting, and internet sensors cities will enhance the quality of life for every resident.

However, this new approach assumes that deep-rooted city problems can be fixed by throwing technology at them. By treating the city like an engineering problem instead of a living political space, this corporate ideology shifts the role of the citizen from a person with constitutional rights to a customer who buys privatized services.

1.2 The Problem Statement

The biggest conflict in Indian cities today is the gap between high-tech promises and the daily survival realities of the working class. While the government promotes pathways like retrofitting and redevelopment, the Area-Based Development model concentrates public funds into small, wealthy commercial enclaves. This leaves the vast majority of the urban population behind.

The government boasts about digital efficiency, but ignores broken physical infrastructure like clogged drains, spatial segregation, and the absence of clean water. When city management relies on computer dashboards, it creates a massive blind spot. Marginalized communities like slum residents and street vendors often lack the digital access or political influence to register on these government systems.

The result is a divided city where digital luxury is surrounded by forgotten neighbourhoods left to decay. Layering smart sensors over broken physical systems fails to fix structural inequality and creates premium zones that remain isolated from the wider urban crisis.

1.3 Research Objectives

This study directly investigates the core theme of the title by examining how official plans measure up to everyday existence. The three main research objectives are:

- To examine the policy promises behind the smart cities mission and see how official digital goals compare with basic human needs on the ground.
- To explore the lived realities of working-class residents by looking at how they survive real world problems like flooding and poor basic services while elite zones get modern upgrades.
- To analyze the gap between shiny tech solutions and everyday urban struggles across four major Indian cities to show where the system fails the average citizen.

1.4 The Four City Quadrant Framework

To provide a national perspective, this research compares four metropolitan areas across distinct geographic and political topographies:

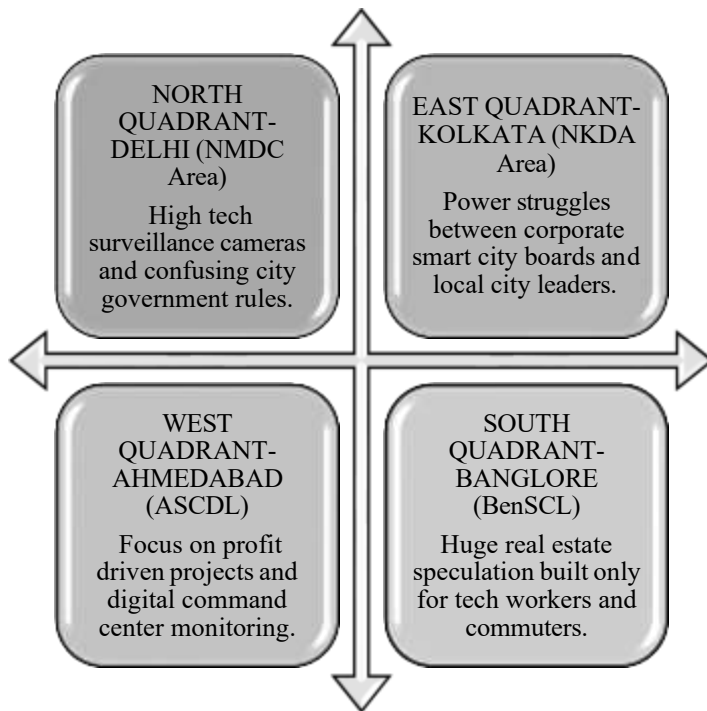


Figure 1.1 The Four City Quadrant Framework

Delhi (North): Explores the tension between high-security surveillance and fragmented institutional authority.

Bengaluru (South): Investigates the link between speculative real estate growth and ecological vulnerability in peripheral wards.

Kolkata (East): Analyzes the institutional conflict between corporate smart boards and traditional elected municipal governments.

Ahmedabad (West): Examines the implementation of market-led planning and spatial polarization in a heavily tracked urban environment.

2. Theoretical Background and Conceptual Foundation

2.1 Reframing the Smart City Debate

The contemporary discourse on smart cities represents an epistemic shift in urban management, characterized by the convergence of global neoliberal urbanism, ubiquitous computing, and the imperative of municipal competitiveness. Historically, the smart city paradigm emerged as a technocratic response to the externalities of rapid urbanization, promising a synthesis of ICT and urban governance to achieve sustainable development. However, the literature reveals a significant ontological instability; there is no universally accepted definition of a smart city. Scholars such as **Hollands (2008)** have critiqued the smart city as an "urban labeling" phenomenon, arguing that the term is deployed to mask specific ideological agendas



predominantly those favoring corporate-led, capital-intensive urban development over social welfare.

While the "Smart City" is marketed as a solution to resource scarcity and service inefficiency, its conceptualization remains dominated by what **Nam and Pardo (2011)** define as the "hard domain" of infrastructure. The global proliferation of the term has been driven by frameworks promoted by bodies like the OECD and the World Economic Forum, which often prioritize quantitative indicators that favor technological deployment over the qualitative nuances of citizenship.

Existing literature often conflates smartness with technological density. This overlooks the fundamental reality that a city's intelligence is not measured by the sophistication of its sensors, but by its capacity to improve the lived experiences of its diverse populations.

2.2 Competing Schools of Smart City Thinking

Current academic thought on smart urbanism can be categorized into three distinct, albeit overlapping, schools. The **Technology-Centred School**, often associated with the work of **Komninos (2009)** and **Batty (2013)**, views the city as a "system of systems" where data-driven optimization is the primary goal. Its strength lies in its potential for efficiency; however, its primary weakness is the technological determinism that ignores the political nature of urban life.

The **Governance-Centred School**, championed by scholars like **Meijer and Bolívar (2016)** and **Gil-Garcia (2012)**, shifts the focus toward the "soft domain" the institutions, partnerships, and policies that facilitate urban change. This school acknowledges the necessity of multistakeholder engagement but often remains trapped in administrative discourse, prioritizing institutional efficiency over democratic legitimacy.

The **Citizen-Centred School**, explored by **Cardullo and Kitchen (2019)** and **Vanolo (2014)**, represents the most recent, yet least empirically developed, frontier. By centering "smart citizens" rather than "smart technologies," this school challenges the premise that top-down data management is synonymous with good governance. Despite the theoretical appeal of this model, it remains underdeveloped in practice, as frameworks that explicitly measure the impact of smart policies on social equity are frequently sidelined in favor of technical indicators.

While governance-centred models acknowledge the role of stakeholders, they often reduce citizen engagement to tokenistic consultation. Theoretical development is currently trapped between technical optimization and institutional management, leaving a significant gap regarding the agency of the urban marginalized.

2.3 Smart Cities Mission in India: Promise versus Practice

India's Smart Cities Mission (SCM) signifies a massive, state-sponsored attempt to formalize the smart city model within the Global South. **Launched by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA)**, the SCM shifts governance toward Area Based Development (ABD)



and the use of Special Purpose Vehicles (SPVs). While the policy rhetoric emphasizes "citizen-centric" outcomes, empirical studies by scholars such as **Datta (2015)** and **Praharaj et al. (2018)** indicate a heavy bias toward the creation of "lighthouses" isolated, tech-enhanced urban enclaves that operate under decentralized governance structures.

The reliance on **Integrated Command and Control Centres (ICCCs)** as the "brain" of the city reflects the mission's technocratic orientation. However, independent evaluations have raised concerns regarding the sustainability of these investments, noting that the SCM frequently overlooks the "soft" infrastructure requirements of Indian cities, such as the persistent challenges of informal housing and water provision. The mission's structure separates project execution from traditional municipal accountability, leading to a fragmented governance environment where policy promises remain largely disconnected from the ground realities of the urban poor.

The SCM is largely driven by a top-down governance approach that prioritizes digital infrastructure and technological solutions.. The literature highlights a recurring policy-practice gap, where the focus on project implementation in limited areas obscures systemic failures of urban service delivery.

2.4 Technology versus Citizenship: The Algorithmic Governance

The integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI), the Internet of Things (IoT), and pervasive surveillance technologies into the urban fabric of India raises profound questions regarding platform and algorithmic governance. While proponents argue that data-driven governance will lead to more responsive public services, critical scholars such as **Kitchin (2014)** argue that this often manifests as "panoptic surveillance" rather than empowerment. In the Indian context, digital governance platforms, intended to streamline service delivery, often create new forms of "digital exclusion" for those who lack the literacy or infrastructure to understand them. **Shelton et al. (2015)** contend that rather than improving everyday life, these algorithmic systems tend to prioritize the optimization of "readable" citizens, effectively sidelining the complex, informal, and non-digitized lived realities of a large segment of the urban population.

The assumption that technology is inherently neutral or inclusive is fundamentally flawed. Digital governance often replicates existing social stratifications, with technological deployment favoring the affluent who are better positioned to utilize the "smart" interface, thereby reinforcing the gap between policy intent and lived experience.

2.5 Lived Realities of Urban India

The literature on urban India often highlights the gap between the aspiration of creating "world-class cities" and the everyday realities experienced by informal settlements, street vendors, and low-income communities. When smart city initiatives are mapped against these realities, a clear conceptual disconnect emerges. Issues such as perennial urban flooding, water insecurity, and the mobility constraints of the informal workforce central to the daily survival of millions are rarely captured by the metrics currently employed by the SCM. **Joss (2018)** and **Cowley (2016)**



argue that this "data silence" regarding the informal economy is not merely a technical limitation, it is a normative choice that renders the most vulnerable populations invisible within the smart city discourse.

Current smart city indicators measure what is easily digitized, rather than what is socially significant. This methodological narrowness creates a profound gap in our understanding of how smart interventions impact, or fail to impact, the survival strategies of the urban poor.

2.6 Research Gap

The review of the literature reveals several profound gaps that this study intends to address:

Conceptual Gap: There is an absence of a strong conceptual framework that defines the "Smart Citizen" beyond a passive user of digital interfaces.

Methodological Gap: Existing smart city indicators are primarily performance-based (tech-centric) rather than outcome-based (well-being-centric).

Policy Gap: There is limited research on the friction between Special Purpose Vehicles (SPVs) and traditional Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) in the Indian context.

Practical Gap: The literature lacks a comparative analysis that maps policy promises directly against the longitudinal lived experiences of citizens.

This table synthesizes the academic discourse, mapping the shift from technocratic optimism to socio-political critique.

Author (APA 7)	Research Context	Methodology	Major Findings	Critical Contribution	Relevance to the Present Study
Datta (2015)	Dholera Smart City, Gujarat	Ethnographic and policy analysis	Smart Cities Mission reflects a neoliberal model of urban development that privileges investment and branding over social inclusion.	Establishes the entrepreneurial and exclusionary nature of smart urbanism in India.	Provides the theoretical foundation for analysing the policy–reality gap and spatial exclusion.
Praharaj et al. (2018)	National Smart Cities Mission	Mixed-method comparative study	Special Purpose Vehicles (SPVs) improve implementation	Introduces the concept of concurrent innovation and	Supports the examination of governance responsiveness



Author (APA 7)	Research Context	Methodology	Major Findings	Critical Contribution	Relevance to the Present Study
			efficiency but fragment urban governance.	governance fragmentation.	and accountability.
Shatkin (2017)	Global South (including Indian cities)	Political economy analysis	Smart city development is driven by capital accumulation and competitiveness, often overlooking equity and inclusion.	Demonstrates how global city ambitions influence urban policy.	Explains how economic priorities shape smart city implementation.
Joss et al. (2019)	Global smart city discourse	Systematic literature review and discourse analysis	Smart city initiatives frequently lack democratic participation and remain technology-driven.	Critiques techno-solutionism and advocates more inclusive governance.	Provides a conceptual basis for evaluating citizen-centred governance.
Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (2025)	National Smart Cities Mission	Government performance report	Reports high project completion rates and widespread implementation of digital infrastructure.	Represents the official policy narrative and implementation achievements.	Serves as the benchmark against which policy promises are critically examined.
Comptroller and Auditor General of India (2025)	National Smart Cities Mission	Performance and financial audit	Identifies delays, financial management issues, weak monitoring, and limited citizen consultation.	Provides independent evidence of governance and implementation gaps.	Supports the analysis of accountability and policy implementation gaps.
Present Study	Delhi, Bengaluru, Kolkata,	Qualitative Multiple-Case Study using Interpretive	Examines how policy promises compare with documented	Introduces the Citizen-Centred Governance	Addresses an important gap by integrating policy analysis



Author (APA 7)	Research Context	Methodology	Major Findings	Critical Contribution	Relevance to the Present Study
	and Ahmedabad	Policy Analysis (IPA) and Documentary Analysis	lived realities across four smart cities.	Framework (CCGF) to evaluate governance responsiveness, citizen participation, and spatial equity.	with citizen-centred governance and lived realities across multiple Indian smart cities.

3. A Citizen-Centred Conceptual Framework

3.1 Conceptual Foundation

The conceptual foundation of this study draws on Interpretive Policy Analysis and Critical Urban Theory to examine how the Smart Cities Mission (SCM) has been interpreted, implemented, and experienced in Indian cities. These perspectives are used because they help explain why the vision presented in policy documents often differs from what citizens experience on the ground. Instead of treating the SCM as a programme centred on digital technologies and infrastructure, this study views it as a governance initiative in which institutions, administrative practices, and decision-making processes shape implementation outcomes. The framework therefore pays attention to governance responsiveness, spatial justice, and algorithmic inclusion, as these concepts make it possible to examine whether governance systems respond to citizens' needs, whether urban interventions are distributed fairly across different social and spatial groups and whether technology-enabled governance includes or excludes sections of the population. This perspective shifts the assessment of smart cities away from technological outputs alone and towards the processes through which policies are translated into practice. It therefore recognises that the meaning of a 'smart' city is determined not only by the technologies it adopts but also by the way governance is exercised, how decisions are made and how citizens experience those decisions in their everyday lives.



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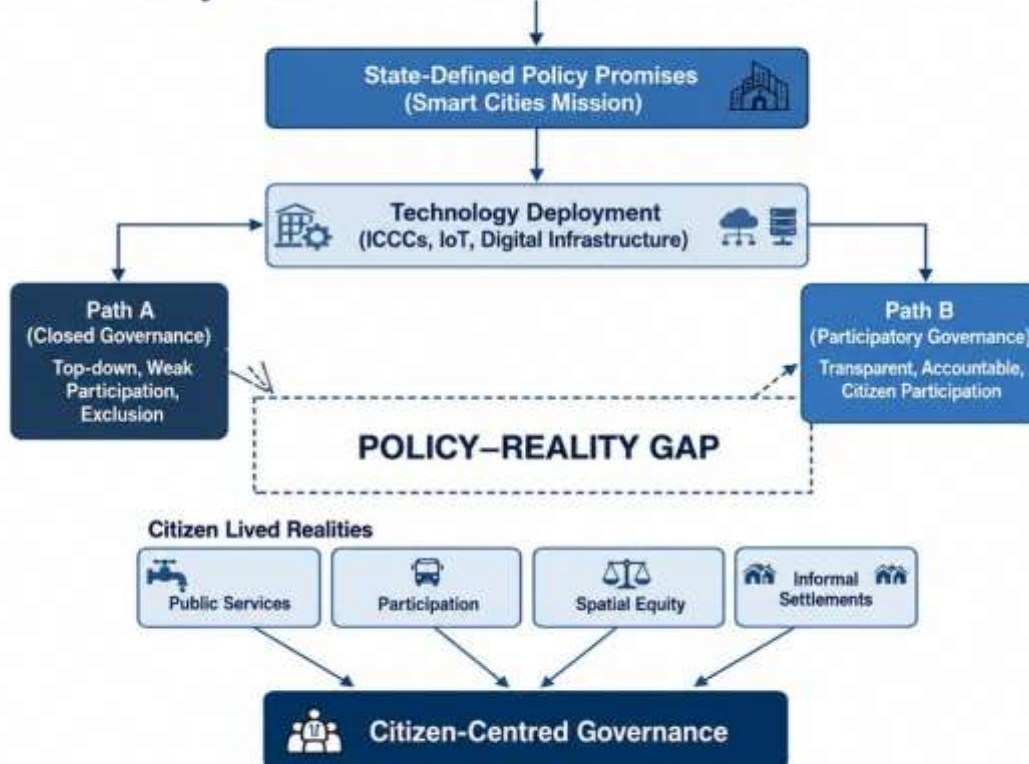


Figure 3.1: The Techno-Social Governance Interaction Model

The model maps the trajectory from policy intent to urban impact through four interconnected components:

State-Defined Policy Promises: The process initiates with the SCM's national agenda, defined by directives toward digital governance, operational efficiency, and modernized urban infrastructure. These promises act as the normative mandate guiding the entire governance apparatus.

Technology Deployment: These policy promises are subsequently translated into instruments of implementation, including Integrated Command and Control Centres (ICCCs), IoT-enabled infrastructure, and digital platforms. Crucially, this framework conceptualizes technology as an instrument for implementation rather than an end-state for urban success.

The Policy-Reality Gap: This represents the central analytical site of the study. The "Gap" emerges when technological implementation fails to engage with the socio-spatial complexities of the city, leading to a dissonance between national goals and the lived experience of citizens.

Citizen Lived Realities: The study evaluates the efficacy of implementation through four critical dimensions: public services, citizen participation, spatial equity, and the integration of



informal settlements. These indicators provide a more granular understanding of development than infrastructure completion metrics, capturing the nuances of everyday urbanism.

3.2 Governance Pathways

The model identifies two distinct institutional pathways that determine the trajectory of the Policy-Reality Gap:

Path A – Closed Governance: This pathway reflects a top-down approach with limited citizen participation and weak accountability, often resulting in exclusion and widening the gap between policy goals and lived realities. The focus remains on technological compliance rather than citizen needs and experiences.

Path B – Participatory Governance: Conversely, this pathway emphasizes institutional transparency, collaborative decision-making, and effective accountability. By actively integrating citizen participation, this model reduces the Policy-Reality Gap, ensuring that technological interventions are responsive to the actual priorities of the urban population.

3.3 Citizen-Centred Governance Framework

The desired outcome of this framework is the realization of Citizen-Centred Governance. This state is achieved when institutions prioritize responsiveness, equitable service delivery, and democratic accountability. As an analytical lens, this framework posits that narrowing the gap between policy and reality requires a fundamental reorientation of institutional mandates. It suggests that technological success is secondary to the quality of the governance "filter," which must prioritize spatial justice and inclusion over the mere optimization of urban flows.

3.4 Analytical Significance of the Framework

This framework serves as a diagnostic lens for evaluating governance quality rather than technological performance. It is particularly suited for analyzing the diversity of urban contexts like Delhi, Bengaluru, Kolkata, and Ahmedabad because it focuses on institutional variability rather than standardized outcomes.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Paradigm

This study is grounded in the **interpretivist research paradigm**, which views social reality as something that is created and understood through people's experiences, interactions, and interpretations rather than as an objective reality that can be measured using numerical indicators alone. According to **Yanow (2000)**, public policies are not simply administrative documents, they reflect the values, assumptions, and priorities of the institutions that develop and implement them. Similarly, **Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012)** argue that policies should be understood as socially constructed texts whose meanings evolve through implementation and public interaction.



In the context of the **Smart Cities Mission (SCM)**, urban governance extends beyond the implementation of technology and infrastructure. It also involves understanding how policies are interpreted, experienced, and negotiated by different stakeholders within the city. Therefore, evaluating the success of smart city initiatives requires more than measuring project completion or digital infrastructure; it requires examining how these initiatives influence citizens' everyday lives. **Following Creswell (2023)**, this study adopts an interpretivist perspective to explore these complex social realities and to understand the gap between policy intentions and citizens' lived experiences.

4.2 Research Approach

A **qualitative research approach** has been adopted because it is well suited to exploring the social, institutional, and governance dimensions of the Smart Cities Mission. Unlike quantitative approaches that primarily measure outcomes through numerical indicators, qualitative research enables a deeper understanding of issues such as citizen participation, governance responsiveness, spatial equity, and inclusion.

The study relies **primarily on documentary evidence**, including policy documents, government reports, audit reports, academic literature, and credible institutional publications. These documents provide valuable insights into both the intended objectives of the Smart Cities Mission and its implementation across different cities. Analysing these sources allows the study to identify differences between official policy narratives and the realities documented by independent institutions and researchers, thereby providing a richer understanding of citizen-centred urban governance.

4.3 Research Design

This research employs a **qualitative multiple-case study design**, which **Yin (2018)** identifies as an appropriate approach for examining contemporary issues within their real-life contexts. The design enables an in-depth investigation of how the Smart Cities Mission has been implemented across different urban settings while recognising that governance outcomes are shaped by local institutional, social, and political contexts.

The study **compares four metropolitan cities like Delhi, Bengaluru, Kolkata, and Ahmedabad** which are selected because they represent diverse regional, administrative, and socio-economic contexts within India. Examining these cities comparatively allows the research to identify both common implementation patterns and city-specific governance challenges, thereby strengthening the overall analysis of the policy–reality gap.

Selection Criterion	Rationale for Selection
Geographic Diversity	To ensure representation of North, South, East, and West India.
Institutional Variation	To capture differences in governance structures and administrative arrangements, including variations in SPV implementation.
Selection Criterion	Rationale for Selection
Socio-Economic Context	To compare technologically advanced urban centres with cities characterised by diverse social and economic realities.
Data Availability	To ensure access to reliable policy documents, audit reports, academic studies, and institutional publications.



Table 4.1: Case Selection Criteria

4.4 Data Sources

To develop a comprehensive understanding of the Smart Cities Mission, the study draws upon multiple documentary sources. Using different types of evidence enhances the credibility of the research by allowing findings to be verified across independent sources.

Source Category	Examples
Policy Documents	Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA) Guidelines, Smart City Proposals (SCPs), NITI Aayog Reports
Audit & Oversight	Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) Performance Audit Reports, Parliamentary Committee Reports
Global & Academic Sources	UN-Habitat Reports, OECD Publications, Scopus-indexed Journal Articles
Media & Public Discourse	Reports from The Hindu, Indian Express, and Down to Earth

Table 4.2: Documentary Data Sources

4.5 Document Selection Criteria

To ensure consistency and academic rigour, all documentary sources were selected using predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Criteria	Details
Inclusion	Official government publications and peer-reviewed literature published between 2015 and 2026 , available in English, and directly relevant to the Smart Cities Mission and urban governance.
Exclusion	Opinion articles without supporting evidence, promotional or marketing materials, and documents published before 2015 that are not directly relevant to the study.
Credibility	Priority was given to official government documents, audit reports, international institutional publications, and peer-reviewed academic research.

Table 4.3: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria



4.6 Data Analysis

The study combines **Interpretive Policy Analysis (IPA)** with **document analysis (Bowen, 2009)** and **thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)** to examine how policy intentions compare with documented implementation outcomes.

Initially, all selected documents were carefully reviewed to gain familiarity with their content. Relevant information was then systematically coded according to the analytical themes developed in the Citizen-Centred Governance Framework (CCGF). The coded data were subsequently grouped into broader themes, enabling comparisons across the four cities and helping identify recurring governance patterns and policy–reality gaps.

Theme	Codes
Governance	SPV autonomy, top-down implementation, accountability, institutional coordination
Inclusion	Digital exclusion, citizen participation, access to public services, digital literacy
Spatial Impact	Area-Based Development (ABD), spatial inequality, infrastructure concentration, informal settlements

Table 4.4: Coding Framework

4.7 Ethical Considerations and Methodological Limitations

This study is based entirely on secondary documentary sources and does not involve human participants. Ethical integrity was maintained through accurate citation, proper acknowledgement of sources, and objective interpretation of the evidence.

The study is limited to documentary analysis of four Smart Cities and therefore does not aim for statistical generalisation. To enhance the credibility of the findings, evidence was triangulated using government reports, audit reports, peer-reviewed literature, and credible institutional sources.

5: Findings and Analysis

The findings of the documentary analysis carried out across the four selected Smart Cities Delhi, Bengaluru, Kolkata, and Ahmedabad. The findings are organised around the three key themes that guide this study: Policy Promises, Lived Realities, and the Policy–Reality Gap, to analysis it compares them to identify common patterns and differences. The findings are then interpreted using the Citizen-Centred Governance Framework (CCGF) developed in Chapter 3.



5.1 Policy Promises of the Smart Cities Mission

The Smart Cities Mission was introduced with the objective of improving urban governance, infrastructure, and quality of life through technology-driven solutions. While the overall vision was similar across all four cities, each city placed greater emphasis on different priorities based on its local context. Table 5.1 summarises the major policy commitments identified from the Smart City Proposals (SCPs) and official government documents.

Policy Dimension	Delhi	Bengaluru	Kolkata	Ahmedabad
Citizen Vision	World-class infrastructure	Innovation and technology-driven development	Inclusive and environmentally sustainable development	Rapid urban renewal and integrated infrastructure
Governance Approach	Centralised administration	Innovation-led governance	Decentralised governance	Market-oriented urban development

Table 5.1 Policy Promises across the Selected Smart Cities

5.2 Lived Realities of Citizens

Although the Smart Cities Mission promised better urban services and improved quality of life, the documentary evidence presents a more complex picture. Reports from the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG), UN-Habitat, peer-reviewed studies, and credible media sources indicate that many challenges related to basic services, citizen participation, and spatial inequality continue to persist.

Lived Reality	Delhi	Bengaluru	Kolkata	Ahmedabad
Public Services	Uneven service delivery	Water scarcity and infrastructure stress	Conventional service delivery	Unequal access across urban areas
Citizen Participation	Limited public involvement	Mostly technology-based participation	Moderate community engagement	Limited opportunities for participation
Informal Settlements	Continued neglect	Environmental vulnerability	Limited infrastructure improvements	Displacement and social exclusion

Table 5.2 Lived Realities across the Selected Smart Cities

The findings suggest that while technological projects have progressed in many locations, improvements in everyday urban life have not always reached all sections of society equally.



5.3 Understanding the Policy–Reality Gap

A comparison of policy commitments and documentary evidence reveals a clear gap between what was planned and what citizens experienced. This gap varies across cities, but several common issues emerge repeatedly.

Dimension	Policy Promise	Documentary Evidence	Gap Identified
Citizen Participation	Inclusive and participatory governance	Decision-making remained largely top-down	Limited public involvement
Digital Governance	Better and more responsive services	Greater emphasis on surveillance and monitoring	Technology without meaningful citizen engagement
Spatial Justice	Balanced urban development	Investments concentrated in selected areas	Uneven urban development
Accountability	Transparent and efficient governance	Weak coordination between SPVs and municipal bodies	Limited democratic accountability

Table 5.3 Policy Promises versus Lived Realities

The comparison shows that many Smart City initiatives successfully delivered physical and digital infrastructure but were less effective in addressing broader concerns related to participation, inclusion, and equitable development.

5.4 Interpreting the Findings through the Citizen-Centred Governance Framework (CCGF)

The findings were further analysed using the Citizen-Centred Governance Framework (CCGF) proposed in Chapter 3. The framework helps explain why similar policy intentions resulted in different citizen experiences across the four cities.

CCGF Component	Evidence	Interpretation
Government Vision	Strong emphasis on technology and efficiency	Development priorities focused more on infrastructure than citizen needs
Institutional Mediation	SPVs played a central implementation role	Limited integration with existing local governance structures
Citizen Reality	Unequal access to services and participation	Citizens experienced varying levels of inclusion and responsiveness
CCGF Component	Evidence	Interpretation



Policy–Reality Gap	Recurring differences between official goals and ground realities	Governance arrangements influenced how benefits reached citizens
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Table 5.4 Evaluation through the Citizen-Centred Governance Framework

Overall, the findings indicate that technology alone cannot ensure citizen-centred urban development. The effectiveness of Smart City initiatives depends equally on responsive governance, meaningful public participation, and attention to local urban needs.

6. Concluding Remarks

This study set out to examine whether the Smart Cities Mission has fulfilled its promise of creating citizen-centred cities by comparing policy commitments with the lived realities of citizens across Delhi, Bengaluru, Kolkata, and Ahmedabad. The findings suggest that although the mission has accelerated the adoption of technology and urban infrastructure, these advancements have not always translated into more inclusive, equitable, or responsive urban governance. The analysis demonstrates that technological innovation alone cannot address the diverse challenges faced by Indian cities unless it is supported by transparent institutions, meaningful citizen participation, and equitable service delivery.

The Citizen-Centred Governance Framework (CCGF) developed in this study provides an alternative way of understanding smart city governance by shifting the focus from technological outputs to governance responsiveness and citizen experiences. Rather than evaluating success solely through project completion or digital infrastructure, the framework highlights the importance of participation, accountability, and spatial justice in assessing urban development.

Ultimately, the future of India's smart cities depends not only on becoming technologically advanced but also on becoming more democratic, inclusive, and responsive to the everyday needs of citizens. It is hoped that this research contributes to ongoing academic debates and supports policymakers in designing urban governance models that place citizens at the centre of smart city development.

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